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Kyrgyzstan: Tense situation in the south of the country

On 7-9 November on the outskirts of Osh, the largest city in southern Kyrgyzstan, attempts were made by ethnic Kyrgyz to occupy parcels of land leased by the local Uzbeks. The reaction of the administration (a visit by the governor; promises to set aside land in another part of the city; limited intervention by the police) has temporarily calmed the situation, but has not dealt with the nature of the problem, namely very strong anti-Uzbek sentiments among the Kyrgyz population. The weakness of the central government (although more than a month has passed since the elections, there is still no government in Bishkek) means that a repetition of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes seems very likely, and the situation in the south remains unstable.

Since the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April this year, the government's control over the south of the country has remained incomplete. The new authorities of the southern districts who were nominated after the coup have no credibility among the Kyrgyz population, and they have only limited instruments to influence the situation. At the same time, a wave of radical nationalism among the Kyrgyz population springing from the Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes of this June has strengthened the position of local leaders who are independent of Bishkek (such as the mayor of Osh, Melis Myrzakmatov, and the Ata-Jurt opposition party).

The extended absence of any effective government in the south of Kyrgyzstan poses the threat of constant instability in that part of the country. In practice, this means not only the possibility of further ethnic clashes, but also the development of organised crime (such as the smuggling of heroin from Afghanistan), the probable development of an Islamic underground, and the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies in the country. This will pose serious threats not only to Kyrgyzstan itself, but also to the neighbouring states.<MMat>